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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH REAR ADMIRAL MARK FOX, COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION CHIEF FOR STRATEGIC EFFECTS, MULTINATIONAL FORCE IRAQ VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM BAGHDAD, IRAQ

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ADM. FOX: Admiral Fox speaking.

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA):
Admiral Fox, Jack Holt, OASD PA. And welcome to the --

ADM. FOX: Hey, Jack.

MR. HOLT: How are you, sir?

ADM. FOX: How are you?

MR. HOLT: Good.

Welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable.

ADM. FOX: Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And some -- it looks like some significant events over the past couple of days. And do you have an opening statement for us, sir?

ADM. FOX: Well, I think I'll review real quickly, you know, the surge of operations, you know what began as a surge of forces has now gone into a surge of operations, that we are now a month into. And it's significant efforts going on up in the Diyala province, in the belts around Baghdad, down south, also out in Al Anbar, up in Mosul. And then we've had other operations that have gone on, going after, in particular, the secret cells that are the Iranian-backed over in Maysan province down south, just north of Basra.

And so there is -- we are on the offensive. We own the initiative. And we're pressing al Qaeda of Iraq and also the secret cells and the rogue elements from Jaish al-Mahdi.

And we're also seeing an increase in the capacity and the capability of the Iraqi security force. We've always said that the Iraqi security force has issues, in particular the police, with loyalty and with professionalism. And they're working it and, you

know, we make no bones about the fact that we -- it's an area of concern. But in the same breath, we are seeing increasing evidence, in particular on the side of the Iraqi army, of them protecting the people that they're sworn to protect, and in many cases paying the ultimate price. We saw in the month of June, for example, the Iraqi security forces suffered three times the number of casualties that we and the coalition did. So they have skin in this game.

But in the security line of operation we are seeing a significant number of operations where we're -- record numbers of caches found. That's driven, quite frankly, by the high level of interaction and trust and confidence that's developed between the Iraqi people and the Iraqi security force, as well as the coalition force.

So I think I'll probably stop with that as a quick one, because I know that people would much rather ask questions and have their questions answered than me just sit here and talk about some of the operations. I'll be glad -- I can go on and on, but I'd thought I'd go ahead and open it up to the Q and A section.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir. Rear Admiral Mark Fox with us, Communications Division chief for the Strategic Effects, Multinational Force Iraq.

And, gentlemen, as always, please identify yourself and your publication when you're asking your question. And, Andrew, let's start with you.

Q Yes. Admiral, good afternoon. This is Andrew Lubin from ON Point. You mentioned a second ago about the rogue elements in the Jaish al-Mahdi. Does this -- and if I phrase things awkward, I apologize -- does this mean that the other group part of JAM is actually cooperating or being relatively cooperative with the surge strategy? And what has Muqtada al-Sadr been doing on this?

ADM. FOX: Well, you know, the Jaish al-Mahdi is not a monolithic organization. I think that's the way I would characterize it. And in fact, it's a large -- it has a whole bunch of different factions, and what we've seen are these rogue elements or secret cells that are not taking any orders or any direction from their leadership, quite frankly, and they are more -- they are sponsored, in many cases, by Iranian influences. And so they're rogue elements, quite frankly.

So, you know, when you think about -- the way that we tackle this issue here of -- we know that a military solution is not the answer to Iraq's challenges. We are fully cognizant and acknowledge the fact that ultimately it will have to be a political solution, and a political solution also demands that there be reconciliation. And to reconcile, that means that as we deal with these different segments of Iraqi society, we are trying to increase the number of people who are interested in participating in a political process in the future, some of whom have borne arms, quite frankly, before. But if we have to feel like we've got to -- we deal with these people with a military or a security construct, then we're going to be here for a long time with a lot of kinetic activity, and that's not what we

necessarily -- this is -- that's not the end state that we think is appropriate.

So what we're trying to do is we're trying to isolate the extremists, the people who will not be reconciled, and expand in that spectrum as wide a group of people that will be reconciled or will be willing to play a political role. And so these secret cells or these -- you know, you've got al Qaeda on one side, which is on the Sunni side of things -- and of course, they're irreconcilable; there will not be any surrender ceremony on a battleship or anything with al Qaeda -- they are absolutely committed to their, you know, jihad view of the world.

And then on the other end of the spectrum, you've got these -- what we refer to as secret cells or rogue elements of Jaish al-Mahdi primarily. And they are not -- many of them are not reconcilable, we don't think, either. So that's one of those things that as we've -- as we've worked our way through it, there are portions of JAM -- in fact, we're trying to work the majority of JAM to be essentially a positive part of the future of Iraq.

(Cross talk.)

Q Admiral, with that -- in that thought then, then is Muqtada al-Sadr if not cooperating with -- is he at least stepping back, trying to regain control of these secret cells and the rogue elements?

ADM. FOX: Well, you know, we are watching this very carefully. And it seems that Sadr is probably a better figurehead than he is a leader. And I'm not quite sure exactly how well he leads his organization. He is a figurehead, no question about it.

But as we've seen -- this is going to be something that we're just going to have to see play out, quite frankly. Because we hope that the large number of people within JAM who are followers of Sadr are going to be in that, you know, the positive category of reconcilable. But we're watching -- we're giving, you know, giving this process -- as we're working it, we're certainly not trying to create direct confrontation, except for the fact that anytime there are people who are using any of these explosively formed penetrators or anytime there's anybody that attacks or threatens the coalition or the government of Iraq, we're going to take the appropriate measures.

And so that's the reason that you'll see in fact over just in the last few weeks, we've taken down a number of these leaders of these rogue elements. There was a lieutenant in the Iraqi police about a week ago that we wound up detaining and actually, you know, we're operating over in Eastern Baghdad, over in Sadr City, to take down these secret cells and these rogue elements.

So -- and quite frankly that is under the prime minister's essentially declaration that number one, it's a non -- it's a unity government that's not interested in sectarian biases. Now it's a Shi'a government admittedly but, you know, we're working with the

prime minister closely. And it's one of these cases where if there are people who are threatening the government or going after the coalition or the Iraqi security force, then we will take appropriate both force protection actions and the appropriate steps to dismantle these rogue elements.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Jarred.

Q Yes, sir, good afternoon. This is Lieutenant Fishman with Air Force Pundit. It seems every day that we're actually winning the war on the ground, yet losing back in Washington. And as the chief of strategic communications and the public affairs part of what's going on, how do we get the disconnect between what actually is happening on the ground in reality versus what happens back here on the home front, because, obviously, the home front controls how much longer we're going to be able to do this.

ADM. FOX: Yeah, you bet.

Well, that's one of the reasons I'm talking to you all, quite frankly, is -- we're doing everything that we can to share the story and to use every means that we can, in particular with non-traditional kinds of things, engaging with folks like you all in the blogger world. We've got a YouTube site that's posted. We're doing all kinds of different sorts of outreach.

I'm inherently an optimistic person, and I believe that the American public has a solid center of gravity about what the right thing to do is. And I share your concerns about getting the word out. That is my job, and I'm working 18-and 19-hour days over here to do that. And quite frankly, I don't necessarily subscribe to the "It's the battle of reporters." The reporters that over here that I deal with I respect, quite frankly. They're in a -- well over a hundred journalists have been killed over here in Iraq. This is dangerous work in combat or in reporting the news.

So I do think that, you know, there is a tendency to focus on the bomb of the day or if it doesn't bleed or if it doesn't explode or something like that, it almost turns into a kind of a ticker tape of what -- you know, the Wall Street kind of thing of how many bodies are recovered, I mean, the kind of just mindless numbers that are thrown out there, when in fact the context and the overall understanding of what's going on here is lost.

And -- but part of that is the nature of the enemy that we're fighting here. When you think about the way that this enemy operates, they are both -- in the al Qaeda side in particular, but also we see it in these rogue elements -- conducting indiscriminate attacks, killing people from every walk of life -- Shi'a, Sunni, Kurd, Turkoman. And these indiscriminate attacks are perfect examples of the nature of the brutal enemy that we're facing. And we deplore -- you know, the contrast could not be any greater, quite frankly.

So that's our job. And one of the reasons I'm engaging with you all is to do just that. And all you can do is speak the truth as you know it. You know, of course the old Mark Twain saying of a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth even pulls its boots on -- we have a number of cases where, you know, there was a report -- I don't know -- a few weeks ago of the 20 people who had been beheaded. And we pursued that, we looked at it, and we pulled a string, and as it turns out, after a day or so's worth of really looking hard at it, we concluded -- know what? There were not 20 people that were beheaded.

Back in February there was a report that there were 18 kids that were killed at a soccer field in Fallujah, and we pursued it, we checked it. They were all reported, oh, by the way, in mainstream media as gospel truth, because, you know, that's kind of the nature of the stringers that are here. And we checked it, verified it, and in fact there were not 18 kids that were killed in a soccer field and in Fallujah.

So the -- getting the truth out -- and I think that's our strongest weapon, quite frankly -- is the ability to articulate what's truly going on and to be able to communicate that to a wide spectrum of our society.

So we're focused on our mission over here. We also are well aware of the fact that our form of government is inherently -- it has arm-waving and political statements and a lot of stuff that goes on that is just part of our process. And I guess I'd leave it at that.

But if there's -- if y'all have any better ideas of how to do this, I'm all ears, because it's my job. We are working very hard -- the number of media engagements and the number of outreach events is going up and up and up. So we're engaging at every opportunity.

Q Just a very quick follow-up to that last point, then, sir, when you said if we have ideas. How do we get those ideas to you?

ADM. FOX: Send them to me in an e-mail, or Major Susan Romano (sp), who is my public affairs -- she's the person who helps prepare me for all of my media engagements. She's a small woman with a strong back that carries a very heavy rucksack and me, you know?

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Ed, you can also -- Jarred, you can also send them to me. I can forward them on to MNF-I and on to Admiral Fox.

Charlie.

Q Yes. Admiral, this Charlie Quidnunc with Whizbang. I listened to your press conference from July 15th, and one of the Iraqi reporters asked a question and I heard the question through a translator. He said, "Congress had voted to pull troops out of Iraq; are we leaving now?"

ADM. FOX: Yeah.

Q And then your response was to start to begin a little civics lesson --

ADM. FOX: Right.

Q -- but it was, frankly, a little bit incomplete because this was just one branch of Congress and then they have to pass a law between both branches, and then it has to be signed --

ADM. FOX: Right.

Q -- by the president, and the veto. Do you think we have a responsibility to train the Iraqi press as to our processes?

ADM. FOX: Well, the way that I always handle those kinds of questions is to use that as an illustrative example of any time -- you know, it's remarkable how our media and what goes on in our country is reported and noted over here. I was in Fallujah back in December, right after the Baker-Hamilton report came out, and I went to a city council meeting in Fallujah. And so help me if the first 35 or 40 minutes of the city council meeting in Fallujah was about the Baker-Hamilton report. And they didn't really understand a clue about it, but they sat there and went back and forth and back and forth about what it meant to them.

And so the things that they see in our media are kind of foremost in their mind, and the kind of question -- I didn't complete the answer in terms of, as you just described, of it has to go through both houses and the entire process, but I was trying to allude to him that there is a civics process here, that in a democratic form of government, things just don't happen; that there's a give and a take. and that's something that over here you haven't seen much of.

And every time I have an opportunity to engage, in particular with the pan-Arab media, I try to -- for example, they will -- there was a large -- or at least there was talk of a large protest of some of Sadr's -- you know, against the occupation, the coalition occupiers, so to speak, around Najaf back in the April time frame.

And my response was, hey, as long as it's a peaceful protest, that's the mark of a free and democratic society, and you know, you don't see any of those Shi'a, the thousands and thousands, the tens if not hundreds of thousands of Shi'a pilgrims -- they didn't do that under Saddam. And so the fact that they're free to, number one, do a religious pilgrimage or number two, to protest about the occupiers means that they're free to do such a thing, which is the mark of a free and democratic society.

So we're big enough, in fact, to be able to tolerate that sort of thing as long as it's not violence, and as it turns out, it was a very -- it was a fairly anemic protest. But it's the very things that they want to use to club of us, you know -- in fact, in my opinion, is one of the greatest strengths that we can use to demonstrate the fact that we're different, and people do have a voice and they're

able to articulate their opinion. And that's a good thing, it's not a bad thing.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And normally, I don't interject any questions in here, sir, but I was just wondering if you could talk a bit about the significance of the capture of al-Mashhadani.

ADM. FOX: Yes, I'd be happy to do that. We did have a press conference today. General Bergner, you know, covered in detail, but I'll hit the high points for you here.

We captured on the 4th of July a terrorist whose name is al-Mashhadani, and he is the -- he is believed to be the most senior Iraqi in al Qaeda of Iraq. He's a close associate of al-Masri, who is the Egyptian-born head of al Qaeda of Iraq, and oh, by the way, he is in our custody. He's -- and he's talking freely.

He has a history. He was a leader in the Ansar al-Sunna terrorist group before he joined al Qaeda of Iraq about two and a half years ago, and he was the emir -- the media emir for Baghdad for the al Qaeda of Iraq. And then, he ultimately became the media emir for all of Iraq, and he actually served as an intermediary between al-Masri, the Egyptian-born head of AQI here now, and Osama bin Laden and Zawahiri. And in fact, most of the communications between senior al Qaeda leadership outside of Iraq and al-Masri went through Mashhadani.

Now, one of the things that they did -- Mashhadani and al-Masri -- they co-founded essentially a virtual organization that they refer to as the Islamic State of Iraq, and it was a pseudonym, an Iraqi pseudonym for al Qaeda of Iraq. And it was essentially an effort on the part of al Qaeda to make itself over and make it more Iraqi, and in fact, it -- what they did is they came up with a fictitious political head of the Islamic State of Iraq, this -- that was known as Omar al-Baghdadi, which is an Iraqi name.

And so having created -- and essentially they had a stand-in, they had a character, a person whose name is Abu Abdullah al-Naima, and he's a -- he was the script reader or the actor who became the persona of al-Baghdadi. And al-Masri, the Egyptian-born head of al Qaeda of Iraq, would basically give this al-Baghdadi fictitious character the scripts to read.

And so to make al-Baghdadi seem to be credible, al-Masri swore allegiance to him and pledged to obey him, which was essentially swearing allegiance to himself, since he knew that Baghdadi was fictitious. Zawahiri has referred repeatedly to Baghdadi in both video and Internet statements, which is -- our assessment is it would be hard to believe that senior al Qaeda leadership would not be aware of this. Either they were completely duped by al-Masri and Mashhadani, or they were witting to it -- one or the other. But it was certainly perpetuating this myth of having a fictitious head, this al-Baghdadi character, as the head of the Islamic State of Iraq.

But what the key is -- I think the key take-away here is they were

trying to distance themselves -- there's a really small number of foreign al Qaeda characters who are in leadership in al Qaeda of Iraq, and they were trying to create an Iraqi face to it and they were calling it the Islamic State of Iraq.

And Mashhadani, in fact, we seized him up in Mosul, and he was -- he's an unrepentant -- I mean he wants to have a caliphate and do all that sort of thing. But he was getting tired of this al Qaeda of Iraq process because they, the foreign leaders, were essentially freezing the Iraqis out of the decision-making process. And as a matter of fact, you know, according to Mashhadani, al-Masri increasingly relied only on foreigners, and the foreigners make up the majority of the leadership within al Qaeda. And al-Masri did not seek or trust the advice of any of the Iraqis in the organization, which highlights again the significance of the operations that our forces have conducted to kill many of these foreign al Qaeda leaders. We've killed Khalil, Khaled and Khatat (sp) al-Turki, who are three al Qaeda leaders that went into northern Iraq to help al-Masri shore up the organization up in northern Iraq, and we've killed them all recently. And as I said, we've had a number of very successful operations taking down node by node and cell by cell the al Qaeda network, especially up in Mosul.

And interestingly enough, al-Masri has become increasingly more paranoid and isolated, especially of the Iraqis that are within the al Qaeda operation because we've killed so many of their foreign leaders.

So Mashhadani is speaking very openly, and it's clear that he was tired of this foreign influence in Iraq. And the -- you know, the al Qaeda of Iraq leaders were misrepresenting themselves and they were purposely deceiving the Iraqi people, trying to cloak themselves into a nationalistic Iraqi feeling, but in fact their purpose is to subjugate the Iraqi people and impose a Taliban-like ideology on Iraq.

So, you know, we now conclude -- the very same thing that happened with al Qaeda, especially out in Al Anbar and to an extent the rogue elements of JAM, these indiscriminate attacks are essentially alienating the people of Iraq. Many of the tribesmen out in Al Anbar were not all that excited about the coalition's presence, quite frankly, and many of them fought us in the years past. But after these indiscriminate attacks, al Qaeda in particular was killing Sunnis -- I mean, there were al Qaeda attacks against Sunni mosques. And so it hadn't taken all that long for the people of Iraq now to understand that their interests are not best served by these extremist groups.

And we're seeing a similar thing now in the Shi'a side, as I was talking about these rogue elements. They're shooting, you know, mortars and rockets into neighborhoods in Baghdad just to randomly terrorize, and they're killing innocent Iraqis. And so we're convinced that these extremists are wearing out their welcome, if you will. And even though al Qaeda of Iraq is only a very small, small group of people, they have been disproportionately responsible for

the accelerants, if you will, or the fueling of the sectarian violence over here. And so we feel like we're on the offense, where the initiative is with us, and we're pushing these guys very hard.

I hope that kind gives you a feel for the Mashhadani piece, though. And if you got any questions, I'll be happy to take them.

Q Quick follow-up, sir. On a -- from a STRATCOM perspective, how do we use that, then, to let the Iraqi people know about what Mashhadani is saying? Because clearly that would be very effective, the more Sunnis get to hear that.

ADM. FOX: You bet. Well, in fact, the press conference that we had today, I would estimate, was probably about 20 percent Western and about 80 percent pan-Arab. So we are reaching out. And in fact we're reaching out to Al-Jazeera English and also taking other pan-Arab media outlet opportunities to share that and to get this word also through spokesmen in the government of Iraq as well.

MR. HOLT: All right.

ADM. FOX: That's one of the things that we're working hard on, is the Iraqi government -- you know, it's just barely a year old. And they have ministries, and they have -- but they don't have the kind of structure, the staff structure, the -- you know, the technocrats, the people who staff things and bubble it up. I mean, they're still in an embryonic stage in many ways.

So that's one of the things my organization has -- I actually have a government of Iraq liaison cell where I'm focused on helping their communicators communicate, so that -- I don't want them -- I want them to speak their own message, but just to be able to have a coherent approach to messaging and a way to get the -- you know, to get information out quickly, accurately, and to share best practices with them.

So that's a portion of what I'm about here. It's not just dealing directly with the media but also helping -- you have to remember that journalism in Saddam's era was pretty simple. (Chuckles.) You took what he gave you and you printed it. And so there -- it's still -- and journalism over here in Iraq is also -- you know, they're learning a lot themselves.

And so it's a multifaceted kind of challenge, quite frankly, but it's also very satisfying. I mean, I had dinner on Monday night with the government of Iraq spokesman. Dr. Ali al-Dabbagh, and the man is just a patriot. I mean, he is -- he could be working -- he could be living in Dubai with his family, and he's here because he believes in this place. And there are a lot of other Iraqis just like him.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Any other follow-ups?

Q Yeah, Jack, I have one.

MR. HOLT: Sure.

Q Yeah. Admiral, Andrew Lubin again from ON Point. Following up on the same discussion, when you have the politicians from here coming over to spend time in the Green Zone, because very few of them do go out in the field, I understand if a Teddy Kennedy or Nancy Pelosi comes back with the same point of view that they arrived with. But when I see the likes of Senator Warner and Senator Lugar coming out with their comments, what are they seeing or what are we missing that they're seeing, or vice versa? What's the disconnect with people like that?

ADM. FOX: Boy, that's a question you're going to have to ask them, I think. I mean, certainly people come over here with a world view, you know, before they got here, I presume, and it's our job to just be as straightforward and, you know, forthright as we can.

I mean, Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus will be coming back to give their September assessment in a -- and it'll be as forthright and as candid and as straight-shooting as they're capable of making it.

And this kind of goes back to our political system discussion, the civics lesson of -- what I would like, my -- what I'd like to see come out of this whole discussion would be, okay, what if -- if some of these possible courses of actions are explored, of some of the proposals of, you know, withdrawal or that sort of thing, there really does need to be a clear and open debate about what does that mean and what are the implications of a withdrawal and what would that mean to the region and to our national interests.

And I think that there's a lot of politics. I know there's a lot of politics that goes into this business. But at the end of the day, as I said, I have a great deal of confidence in the American people, in our political process.

And so it's one of those things where we've got to just never grow weary of doing what we know is right and articulating it as clearly and as candidly as we can. And -- but you know, at the end of the day, it will be, you know, the president is the commander in chief, is the one who sets our mission. And Congress is the portion of the government that authorizes and appropriates the resources for our mission.

So it's one that I'm wholly subscribed to. I believe in it strongly. And that's one of the very reasons that I serve. But if I didn't think that it was worth it or if I didn't think it was doable, I wouldn't be over here. This is my fifth time in this region since 1990.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir, Rear Admiral Mark Fox, Communications Division chief for Strategic Effects, Multinational Force Iraq. Thank you, sir, for being with us.

ADM. FOX: You bet.

MR. HOLT: And we look forward to doing this again -- good information. Thank you, sir, very much.

ADM. FOX: I really enjoyed it and I'd look forward to the next time.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir.

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